

Labor in the Synagogue 2022
Sabbath September 3, 2022
SHOF'TIM Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9
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“The double exhortation of ‘Justice, justice shall you pursue’ could not be more forceful. Moreover, this command is addressed to the communal ‘you’. It applies not only to judges, but also to every member of the community including succeeding generations.” SHOF'TIM, Deuteronomy 16: 18-21:9, by Justice Annabelle Imber Tuck, **The Mussar Torah Commentary**, Rabbi Barry H. Block, Editor, Central Conference of American Rabbis, CCRR Press, 355 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY, 2020.

“From the earliest days of the labor movement in the US, Jews have organized unions for collective bargaining and establishing contractual obligations. Many Jews continue to take leadership roles in their unions and through the Jewish Labor Council, working to establish rights and build the empowerment of others, particularly new immigrants and low-wage workers.

At the grassroots level, many Jews are organizing to raise the baseline of values and standards. Jews United for Justice (in Washington DC) and others have led the way in advocating for local living-wage campaigns that create a higher standard for their cities, while the Progressive Jewish Alliance (Los Angeles) has been at the forefront of a campaign against garment sweatshops in southern California.” By Jeremy Burton <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/labans-excuse-labor-ethics-and-community-standards/>

“But mishpat alone cannot create a good society. To it must be added tzedakah, distributive justice. One can imagine a society which fastidiously observes the rule of law, and yet contains so much inequality that wealth is concentrated into the hands of the few, and many are left without the most basic requirements of a dignified existence.

There may be high unemployment and widespread poverty. Some may live in palaces while others go homeless. That is not the kind of order that the Torah contemplates. There must be justice not only in how the law is applied, but also in how the means of existence – wealth as God’s blessing – are distributed. That is tzedakah.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/reeh/tzedakah-the-untranslatable-virtue/>

“The highest degree, exceeded by none, is that of one who assists a poor person by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment – in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people’s aid. With reference to such aid it is said, “You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you” ([Leviticus 25:35](#)), which means strengthen him in such a manner that his falling into want is prevented.” Maimonides <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/reeh/tzedakah-the-untranslatable-virtue/>

“With its combination of charity and justice, its understanding of the psychological as well as material dimensions of poverty, and its aim of restoring dignity and independence, not just meeting needs, tzedakah is a unique institution. It is deeply humanitarian, but it could not exist without the essentially religious concepts of Divine ownership and social covenant. The prophet Jeremiah says of king Josiah, ‘He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know Me? says the Lord.’ To know God is to act with justice and compassion, to recognise His image in other people, and to hear the silent cry of those in need.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/reeh/tzedakah-the-untranslatable-virtue/>

(possible introduction)

“Tzedek, Tzedek, tirdof: Justice, justice shall you pursue”. Something immediately repeated in Torah demands the special attention and obedient response of God’s People. When we choose to pursue justice, we claim our part of responding to the Covenant, and our understanding of being made in the image of God. God told Moses, “Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them.” (**Exodus** 3:9)

When we hear the cries of those oppressed or living under systems of injustice, we take great risks when we choose to advocate or act on their behalf. It is true of anyone choosing the road of justice in the face of injustice and oppression. Chris Smalls understands this exactly. Who is Chris Smalls? Chris Smalls was fired from the Amazon Warehouse on Staten Island in 2020 as the Covid epidemic began infecting and killing hundreds in the New York City area. After filing an unfair termination complaint against Amazon, a year after that he formed the Amazon Labor Union and began an organizing effort to form the warehouse workers as a labor union.

Chris recruited two warehouse employees as organizers. These two employee organizers were living in their cars, as their salaries were insufficient to pay rent anywhere in the vicinity of the warehouse. The three of them faced the full weight and force of Amazon financial resources against them, spending over \$4million to defeat organizing efforts.

Amazon’s union busting efforts included, forcing employees to attend mandatory meetings where mistruths were spread regarding union membership, surveillance of workers, massive printing of anti-labor flyers and posters spread throughout the warehouse. Because Chris Smalls dresses in clothing associated with black hip-hop culture, rumors were spread regarding his supposed lack of intelligence, and his alleged immoral and illegal tactics.

On April 1, 2022, the workers at this Amazon warehouse voted 2,654–2,131 in favor of the union. Although that is the first of many difficult and tougher battles ahead of them, Chris Smalls and his two homeless organizers represent what is necessary to bring justice into the world today. They are 21st Century examples of a “David” slaying “Goliath” with the use of one sling shot and two pebbles!

On this Labor Day Weekend, we need to remember that what happened on Staten Island in New York City is also happening in Maine as well. In May 2020, nurses at Maine Medical Center in Portland voted 1001-750 to form a labor union affiliated with the Maine State Nurses Association. This also came after a well-funded anti-union campaign launched by Maine Medical Center administration.

In January 2022, workers at Bates College in Lewiston cast their votes on whether or not to form a union. But those votes remain uncounted until appeals filed by the Bates College administration are settled by the National Labor Relations Board. Like Amazon, and Maine Medical Center, Bates College administration expended large amounts of money hiring law firms established for the sole purpose of disrupting, harassing, and stopping union organizing efforts in workplaces. Some of their ruffian tactics are designed to frighten workers and keep them from making an informed and truthful decision regarding union organizing.